

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ARMENIA
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE VISION OF ST. GREGORY
(AGATHANGELOS §731-755)

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When a new religion becomes established in a given region, a change, of course, takes place which may be more or less profound. There is a clear tendency on the part of the new religion to reduce the importance of the previous religion and to make the "conversion" appear as a total and sudden rupture with the ancient faith. In reality, however, the establishment of a new religion would more accurately be described as a process of transformation which requires a rather long time. It is the task of the historian to elucidate this process as far as it is still possible to do so.

The conversion of Armenia to Christianity, as described in Agat'angełos,¹ clearly shows the tendency indicated above. The work of converting the Armenians is ascribed to one Gregory, called the Illuminator, who, on the order of King Trdat II after refusing to worship the goddess Anahit, is thrown into a deep pit. Gregory's miraculous survival in this prison for nearly 15 years plays a decisive role in convincing the king and the nobles of the superiority of Christianity. The time of the conversion is compressed to the period of Gregory's missionary activity and the idea of a total conversion is conveyed by stressing the unanimity with which the nation acts and is acted upon. Thus, we often read phrases like "the king, the nobles and the common people," or "all the people and the king,"² where there is no question of exceptions or opposing groups. Such an effect is achieved by the story of the punishment of all non-believers. The king is transformed into a beast and beset by evil spirits, and all other non-believers, princes and commoners, possessed by demons. This episode also serves to sharpen the contrast between the earlier period of "paganism" and the later period of Christianity, when the Armenians, having been cured by Gregory, accepted

the new doctrine. The contrast is reinforced in the description of the country as a whole. The punishment of the king and the people was said to have been accompanied by "a terrible desolation upon the country" (§213), but after the conversion to Christianity, it is said:

At that time this land of Armenia was blessed,
desirable and immensely admired (§854).

Similarly, the ancient faith is described in terms of the useless worship of idols made of stone and wood, a false lawless cult instituted by Satan and the demons.³ These are conventional arguments taken from the polemics directed by Jews and Christians against the polytheistic religions. Although the heathen Armenians are ignorant and barbarous,⁴ they undergo a great transformation once they are converted, becoming spiritual, sober, and instructed.⁵ To sum up, Agat'angelos' leading principle in presenting the history of Armenia's conversion is to show that there was a total and sudden change in religion and civilization. The allegorical vision of Gregory expresses this idea with the image of herds of black goats who pass through waters and thereby turn into white, shining sheep (§740).

The conversion of Armenia was, in reality, more complicated. On the one hand, there were Christians in Armenia long before the missionary work of Gregory at the beginning of the fourth century.⁶ On the other hand, some early Armenian writers preserve accounts which point to a strong influence of the pre-Christian religion long after the official conversion of the country. In the biography of Mesrob, for example, Koriwn reports that in his time (the early fifth century) there were many "pagans" in the province of Gok't'n, in the eastern part of Armenia, who were converted by Mesrob. Again, the picture of the majority of the Armenians given by P'awstos Buzand in one passage of his historical work clearly reveals the persistence of the ancient religion among people. Long after the conversion, he maintains, the Armenians still devoted themselves to the mythology and the cult of the pre-Christian period.⁷ The civilizing power of Christianity, as described by Agat'angelos, had evidently not been able to transform the people in the way expected by the Christian church. Other evidence shows the conversion to have been a gradual process of cultural transformation during which much pre-Christian material was preserved and assimilated into the new Christian culture of Armenia.⁸ Here we are concerned with a particular text which reveals a continuity in one aspect hitherto unrecognized.

The conversion of Armenia and the founding of the first Christian

monuments are prefigured in a vision that appears to St. Gregory. By virtue of its content, this famous text holds an important position in the work of Agat'angelos. In an arrangement which corresponds to the traditional presentation of apocalyptic visions in early Jewish and Christian literatures, the vision of Gregory is divided into two parts: that which is seen by the visionary (§733-740) and its subsequent explanation by an interpreting angel (§741-755).

In the vision, the importance given to light and fire images is striking. The firmament of heaven opens and a man in the form of light descends (§733: ew ijeal ayr mi i kerparans lusoy). Gregory sees a stream of light flowing out from heaven, accompanied by numberless shining figures with wings like fire. The place where they arrive becomes radiant with light.⁹ In the middle of the city of Vałaršapat,¹⁰ the visionary sees a tall column of light or fire (§736: siwn mi hrełēn, §737: lusełēn seann) with a capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light. Three columns of cloud, with fiery capitals and crosses of light above, surround the column of light, which shines out among the other, lower columns. Above the four columns, which form something like a building with wondrous vaults, there appears a throne of fire with the Lord's Cross above, which spreads light all around. A multitude of fiery altars, each with a column and a cross, become visible, shining out like stars (§736-738).

This prominence of light and fire symbols distinguishes the vision in Agat'angelos from similar Biblical traditions taken over by the Christians of Armenia. Some of the terms used by Agat'angelos may allude to the tradition of the column of cloud and the column of fire in which the God of Israel appeared to his people, during the wanderings in the desert. In Exod 13: 21-22 and Neh 9: 19, to mention the principal passages, it is said that in the night, God guided the Israelites by the column of fire, illuminating their way. While the terminology is similar, though not identical,¹¹ the differences in meaning and content clearly assure the independence of Agat'angelos from the Exodus tradition. The idea of the "glory" (Hebrew: kābōd) of YHWH, which spreads light around it (Ezek 1: 27, 10: 4, and 43: 2) presents a certain similarity to the description in Gregory's vision of the throne of fire, above the columns, extending light in every direction (§738). With its evocation of the flaming throne of God in Dan 7: 9, the imagery of this particular passage in the vision of Gregory may be influenced by the Biblical concept of the shining kābōd of God or that of his fiery throne.¹²

It seems difficult, at any rate, to explain the stress laid on the imagery of light in Agat'angelos solely by reference to Jewish and Christian sources. More important in differentiating the vision of Gregory are the two precise functions ascribed to the light and fire phenomena in general.

Firstly, they transmit in a quite material way a divine messenger and other celestial beings from heaven down to the earth. Secondly, the light which flows down and which also appears in the form of a column marks a particular place in the middle of the city, above a circular base of gold, which is to be a place of worship. This is explicitly stated later in Agat'angelos (§769-770): Gregory, together with the king and the people, goes to the place where the column of light or fire appears and they enclose the spot where the "house of the Lord" is to be built later. The importance and the characteristic use in Agat'angelos of the light and fire imagery express, I think, a continuity in the religious symbolism of ancient Armenia.

We know little about the pre-Christian faith of the Armenians. The scanty evidence which has come down to us, however, shows a thorough influence of Iranian religion.¹³ One of its characteristic features appears to be a complex of light and fire symbolism is intimately bound up with the birth or appearance of a divine figure or messenger. In some variants, this complex contains the idea of the fire or light descending from heaven to indicate a place of worship. The light and fire symbolism may be associated with different figures, such as the god Mithra, the prophet Zoroaster, the coming saviour (particularly the Saoshyant), or the Iranian king. A brief survey of the principal texts where this symbolism is to be found will give an idea of its various expressions.

Dio Chrysostomus of Asia Minor, the Greek rhetor and philosopher of the late first century A. D., has preserved an account of an Iranian cult-myth transmitted to him by the western Magi.¹⁴ Fire from heaven, we are told, descends and lights a hill which burns perpetually. The king, with the Persian nobles, approaches the flaming hill in order to pray to the divinity. A man, in this case Zoroaster, comes out of the fire and exhorts the king and his men to be confident and to perform sacrifices "as if one had come to the place of the god."

The birth of Zoroaster, as described in the Pahlavi texts, is accompanied by several light phenomena. According to the Dēnkart,¹⁵ during the three nights preceding the birth of the prophet, the village of his father Purusasp, is completely illuminated. The inhabitants run away,

thinking the village has caught fire, but when returning, they find that "a man radiant of light"¹⁶ has been born there. The Selections of Zātspram likewise report that the xvarnah of Zoroaster comes down to the earth in the manner of fire "from the endless light."¹⁷ The fiery xvarnah enters Zoroaster's mother, who becomes radiant, and the place where he is born emits a great light which shines out even to distant places.¹⁸ The passages in Dēnkart and in the Selections of Zātspram which are concerned with this theme refer to earlier authoritative traditions written in the Avestan language.¹⁹

The royal legend connected with Mithridates Eupator of Pontus (121-63 B. C.) shows the importance given to the light symbolism. During the year he was born and the year he was enthroned, a great, shining star appeared, which was so large that it occupied a fourth of the heavens. The light of the star was so intense that the entire firmament seemed to catch fire.²⁰

Finally, there is the tradition of the Magi and the Star. Although this tradition has been preserved only in Christian writings,²¹ it is nevertheless obvious that we are dealing with an authentically Iranian tradition.²² According to the chief texts, the Opus imperfectum in Matthaëum²³ and the Chronicle of Zuqnin,²⁴ the Magi, during a certain feast, gather on a hill called the mountain of victory (mons victorialis; in the Syriac text twr nṣḥn'), where there is a cave with a fountain and wonderful trees. Having purified themselves in the fountain, they pray in silence and wait for the appearance of a great light announcing the coming of a divine figure. Then a star above a column of light appears, the light descends and fills the cave, and the entire mountain becomes luminous. The heavens are opened, like a large gate, and radiant beings in human form descend, carrying the light of the star in their hands.²⁵ A little man (Syriac: 'nš' z'wr')²⁶ descends through the column of light and comes forth in the cave with the flaming light.

The texts do not tell us who this divine being, manifesting himself through the light, might be, because at this point the Iranian tradition has been superseded by the Christian legend of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Most probably, the radiant figure appearing through the column of light is none other than the god Mithra or his incarnation in a savior king. In the Mysteries of Mithra the birth of the god is often depicted showing a little man coming out of the rock, holding a burning torch in his hand.²⁷ Sometimes flames appearing out of the the rock underline the fiery character

of the god being born,²⁸ who is also called genitor luminis.²⁹ In late Achaemenian and Parthian times, the connection of Mithra with light and the sun is common in Iran even outside the Mysteries. It is also during this period that the Iranian king becomes associated particularly with Mithra. The king is styled "the great light of Mithra"³⁰ or "he who is enthroned with Mithra and rising together with the sun."³¹

In the tradition of the Magi and the star, the mountain with its cave where the light descends is clearly considered as a place of worship. This is evident in the praying and the ritual washing of the Magi. Further evidence of the cultic setting is found in the account of Porphyry referring to Eubolus who says that Zoroaster consecrated a cave and a fountain in the hills of Persis for the worship of Mithra.³²

We are thus presented with a clear pre-Christian background which explains the emphasis placed on the light and fire phenomena as well as their central functions in the vision of Gregory. Some of the characteristic details, such as the appearance of the column of light or fire,³³ and the descent of a divine messenger and radiant beings with the light, have their closest equivalents in Iranian traditions. It may furthermore be significant that in Agat'angelos the golden base on which the column of light appears is compared to a large hill.³⁴

Our conclusion is that in the vision of Gregory Agat'angelos draws on pre-Christian symbolism which has been adapted to a new context and interpreted more explicitly along Christian lines in the second part of the vision. The most plausible explanation of this influence is that the light and fire symbolism, as evidenced in the Iranian traditions, was part of the Armenian pre-Christian religion too.

A fragment of the mythical complex concerning the appearance of a divine figure through light and fire has in fact been preserved by the Armenian tradition. This is the famous passage in Movsēs Xorenac'i describing the birth of Vahagn, the hero-god whose name is derived from the old Iranian Verethraghna. In the few lines quoted by Xorenac'i from an ancient poem (erg), it is said that Vahagn manifests himself as a young child (or little man?), a patanekik in Armenian, rushing out (vazēr) from the reeds in flames and fire.³⁵ There is much evidence in favor of the supposition that the epiphany of Mithra, described along the lines of the Iranian light and fire symbolism, was known and used also in ancient Armenia.³⁶

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Mithra (Armenian: Mihr)

seems to have been, together with the goddess Anahit, the principal divinity of Armenia. Although the materials concerning Mihr and his cult that have come down to us are sparse, we get a hint of his importance to the Armenians. We know of two temples dedicated to the cult of Mihr: one in Bagayaric in western Armenia, probably going back to Achaemenian times,³⁷ the other in Garni in the northeastern part of the country, dating from the first century A. D.³⁸ One of the general terms for "temple" in old Armenian, mehean, derives from the name of Mihr (Middle Iranian: mihriyan),³⁹ thus attesting the importance of this god among the Armenians.⁴⁰ A month, mehekan, is named after the god Mihr.⁴¹ The Armenian king Trdat who, accompanied by Magi, came to Rome to visit Nero, is said to have adored Mithra.⁴² A Greek geographical writing connects Mithra with the river Arax in the heart of Armenia.⁴³ Last but not least, the popular epic cycle, known as David of Sasun, seems to have preserved important traditions about the god Mihr-Mithra, pertaining to his eschatological role as well as to his cult in western Mithraism.⁴⁴ In one of these traditions, centered around the figure of Mher (= Mihr), we are told that once a year, at midnight on Ascension Day,

heaven and earth come together,
they embrace one another in the light⁴⁵

whereupon the rock in which Mher dwells, miraculously opens and Mher comes out with his horse. This recalls the first line of the poem on the birth of Vahagn "heaven and earth were in travail" and the myth of Mithra being born in light out of the rock, celebrated in an annual feast by the Magi.

In central and eastern Asia Minor, the cult of Mithra seems to have been already well established in the second century B. C. The royal dynasty of Pontus, the Mithridates, stands under the protection of the god from whom they derive their name.⁴⁶ In Commagene the god Mithra plays a prominent role on the monuments of the royal dynasty. Mithra is the god who institutes the king in his dignity as shown by the scenes of their dexiosis. In the royal decrees, Mithra, identified with Apollo-Helios, is second to Zeus-Oromazdes.⁴⁷ An inscription in Ariamneia from the first century B. C. mentions a person who was a Magus of Mithra.⁴⁸ Other inscriptions dating from the first centuries of our era demonstrate the continuity of the cult of Mithra in Asia Minor.⁴⁹

To sum up the result of our investigation so far, we may say that there is a continuity of religious symbolism in the use that Agat'angelos

makes of the light and fire imagery. There is more to say about the continuity of symbolism in the vision of Gregory. The fiery altars mentioned in §739 probably allude to the Iranian pyreia of which it is said in the angel's interpretation that they will be truly the altars of God (§752).⁵⁰ The description of the fiery columns in Agat'angelos has in fact been associated with the particular form of the Mazdean fire-altars in the Sasanian period.⁵¹ The tall and fearful man who comes swiftly down from heaven like an eagle and strikes the ground of the earth with his golden hammer, as seen by Gregory in §735, has certainly pre-Christian models.⁵² One may point to Vahagn who as "dragon-handler" (višapak'aṭ)⁵³ must have had a weapon like the club of the Iranian Verethraghna or the hammer of the ancient Scandinavian god Thórr. Resemblances to more ancient native deities, such as the one whose image has been found in Karmir Blur, holding in his right hand an object which looks like a hammer and in his left hand an axe, cannot be ignored. This image may depict Teišeba, the god of war and thunder who gave his name to the ancient fortress of Karmir Blur, Teišebani;⁵⁴ or perhaps it represents another god connected with forging and warfare.

A continuity in religious matters manifests itself also in the persistence of sacred times and places of worship. Agat'angelos offers a good example of the impact of the ancient religious feasts on the Christian calendar. After the baptism of the royal house and a multitude of people in the Euphrates, it is said that Gregory instituted a commemoration of the martyrs and that he fixed the date for celebrating this festival at the same time as the worship of the former gods Amanor and Vanatur (§836). This passage illustrates also the continuity of the cult in one and the same place although there has been a change of religion. The text states that the Christian feast should be celebrated in the same place where they previously used to worship the pagan gods.

Such a cultic continuity seems to have occurred in more than one place. A Christian church was, according to Agat'angelos, erected on the foundations of the temple of Vahagn in Aštišat.⁵⁵ When mentioning this church P'awstos Buzand makes the statement that the Armenians generally transformed pagan cult-centers into Christian places of worship. Archaeological excavations have also revealed the existence of pre-Christian remnants below the churches of St. Hrip'simē and the basilica of Kassakh.⁵⁶

In the Iranian religion, as we have seen, the myth of a descending light or fire also has the function of marking a sacred place where a cult will be

performed. Now, the use made by Agat'angelos of this myth in its cultic setting strongly suggests that the place in the middle of Vałaršapat where the light-stream descended and the column of light appeared, was a center of worship before a Christian church was built on the same spot.

What does the archaeological evidence tell us?⁵⁷ The excavations made under the present cathedral of Ējmiacin in the late fifties have shown that the actual plan of the church goes back to a building from the fifth century, in all probability the church erected by Vahan Mamikonian a short time after 480. Below this fifth-century church there were found remnants of an earlier construction, showing four somewhat irregular bases for pillars and an apse, to mention the most important remnants. In the eastern apse, within the oldest part and below the altar-stone from the fifth century, a fire-altar was found. Furthermore, in front of the bema of the same apse an Urartian stele with a cross carved on the upper part was discovered.

How to interpret these findings? The earliest remnants found below the present cathedral are generally interpreted as belonging to the first Christian church erected by Gregory following the divine command in the vision.⁵⁸ A. Sahinian, the excavator, is also of the opinion that the Persians, during their incursions in the fourth and fifth centuries, destroyed the first church and transformed it into a fire-temple.⁵⁹ The stele, according to Sahinian, shows that in the Urartian period Ējmiacin and its surroundings were a cult-center.⁶⁰

It seems to me, however, that things are more complicated, and I will indicate some problems to which I have no definite solution. For the interpretation of the archaeological findings I am only able to present hypotheses which I hope will stimulate further discussion.

The Armenian tradition as represented by the fifth-century historians certainly asserts that Gregory erected a church "in the middle of the city" of Vałaršapat. The principal witness to that is the text of Agat'angelos, especially the vision in §733-755 through which Gregory receives the divine command of building "the house of the Lord."⁶¹ Łazar Parpec'i seems to reflect this tradition when stating that the "house of the Lord" in Vałaršapat had been erected by an angel.⁶² In describing the vision seen by Sahak Part'ev at the "altar of the Lord" in the cathedral of Vałaršapat, Łazar clearly reveals his dependence on Agat'angelos.⁶³ It is generally believed that the cathedral of Gregory the Illuminator was destroyed or badly damaged by the Persians, under Shapur II, who invaded Armenia and ravaged

the country.⁶⁴ The evidence is the report of P'awstos Buzand of how the Persians destroyed the churches in many provinces and how they captured Vałaršapat and leveled the city without leaving a single building intact.⁶⁵ Using the same evidence of P'awstos, one could, however, argue in an opposite way. If the cathedral of Gregory, supposed to be renowned all over the country, existed at that time in Vałaršapat, it becomes difficult to understand why its destruction is not explicitly mentioned. Nor is it stated by P'awstos that churches were transformed into fire-temples.⁶⁶

If the first and main textual witness of an early fourth-century cathedral in Ējmiacin is the book of Agat'angelos, and knowing that the actual Armenian text was not redacted before 460, how can we be sure that the remnants found below the fifth century level belong to a Christian building? In the materials to which I have had access, it is not obvious that the fire-altar was found in a layer distinct from the one belonging to the supposed early fourth-century cathedral. Moreover, it is peculiar that, according to Agat'angelos, a church is not immediately erected on the spot where the column of light appeared as is done on the places where the three lower columns were revealed. The place for the future cathedral, "the house of the Lord," is simply encircled and consecrated through the setting up of a cross (§769-770).⁶⁷ Only at a later time is a church erected there by Gregory. Considering the compressed perspective of Agat'angelos' description of the conversion, this fact may be taken as an indication that, in reality, the cathedral was not constructed until a much later period, e. g. the fifth century.

If we look back to the imagery of the vision, Gregory sees an abundant fountain flowing forth which fills the plains. This, of course, may be an allusion to Christian baptism as explicated in the interpretation of the vision (§751). In fact, a basin with water conduits seems to have been part of the fourth century construction in Ējmiacin. This element has been taken to be the baptismal font of the first church;⁶⁸ however, the Iranian traditions which we have mentioned also speak about a fountain and ritual purifications. The shrines of western Mithraism are usually provided with a water basin and ducts, as is the rule in Zoroastrian fire-temples. Moreover, the fire-temples often have a dome-like structure resting on four corner-piers or pillars⁶⁹ and could easily be transformed into Christian churches or vice versa.⁷⁰ It must, however, be noted that the normal form of Iranian fire-temples, at least in the Sasanian period, had the fire-altar in the center of the dome. In

Ējmiacin the fire-altar was found in an apse outside the square formed by the four bases.⁷¹ The fourth-century construction may then represent an Armenian pagan sanctuary dedicated to the cult of Mihr or perhaps Anahit. This sanctuary could have been reutilized, after some modifications, as a Christian church until the fifth-century cathedral was erected. Another possibility is that the original, supposedly pagan building was demolished to give place to the fifth-century church. In the vision, Gregory sees four columns from which wonderful vaults are stretching, and there is something like a dome above. As A. Khatchatrian has pointed out,⁷² these details suggest that the visionary is describing an actual building either completed or under construction. In this case, however, it would have been the construction of the fifth century cathedral which, with respect to chronology, fits well with the final redaction of the Armenian text of Agat'angelos.⁷³

The foregoing remarks are intended to illustrate the complexity of the data which we have to consider when interpreting the earliest history of the cathedral of Ējmiacin. Whatever the implications drawn from the discovery of the fire-altar, I think that the imagery used by Agat'angelos, together with the discovery of the stele, point to the existence of a pre-Christian cult in the place where the present cathedral stands.

In conclusion, the vision of Gregory is in itself an eloquent witness to the change of religion in ancient Armenia. In addition to the obvious Judeo-Christian background of our imagery, we find a continuity expressed in the preservation of certain pre-Christian symbols, figures, and ideas. The materials taken over have been adapted and Christianized and we may see a concrete expression of this process in the emphasis put on the cross (xač'n terunakan) in the text of Agat'angelos. On his campaign to uproot the pagan cults, Gregory sets up the Lord's cross, "the all-saving sign," everywhere, consecrating the ancient places of worship for the new faith.⁷⁴ Just as the cross engraved on the pre-Christian stele found below the altar of the cathedral seems to have been a mark of Christianization, so too the crosses which appear above the column of light and the fiery altars in the vision may be seen as the visible mark of the Christianization of pagan symbols or ideas.

NOTES

I wish to express my thanks to Peter Cowe, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for correcting the English of my manuscript.

¹The basis for the study of Agat'angelos is the critical edition of the Armenian text by K. Ter Mkrtč'ian and S. Kanayanc' (Tiflis, 1909). Furthermore, the recent edition and translation by R. W. Thomson, Agathangelos' History of the Armenians (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1976) is particularly useful for the commentaries and the references in the English text to Biblical passages alluded to by Agat'angelos. The Greek translation of the authoritative Armenian text (Aa) has recently been edited by G. Lafontaine, La version grecque ancienne du livre arménien d'Agathange, édition critique (Louvain, 1973). Another Greek text (Vg) of the life of Gregory contains the vision treated in the present study. It has been edited by G. Garitte, Documents pour l'étude du livre d'Agathange (Studi e Testi 127; Città del Vaticano, 1946). Garitte (246-260) shows that this Greek version is based on an Armenian text different from the one that has come down to us.

²See, for instance, Agat'angelos §§211-213, 221, 225, 243, 246, 728, and 832.

³Ibid., §§67, 232, 234, 241, 771, 787, and 799.

⁴Ibid., §§789, 797, 809, and 839.

⁵Ibid., §§789, 837, 839, and 865.

⁶The legends of Thaddeus and Bartholomeus preaching Christianity among the Armenians in the first century may contain an historical core in preserving the memory of an early mission in Armenia. The Roman church reveres a St. Acacius said to have been martyred in the year 110 in the region of Ararat together with many other Christians. Eusebius cites a letter from a Greek patriarch to an Armenian bishop. For this and other indications of Christianity in Armenia before the fourth century, see M. Ormanian, L'Eglise arménienne (2 ed., Antelias-Liban, 1954), 3-8.

⁷P'awstos Buzand 3.13.

⁸Armenian folklore has preserved fragments of the ancient pre-Christian faith, cf. the general statements of M. Abeghian (Abelyan), Der

armenische Volksglaube (Leipzig, 1899), 5-7, and of A. Aharonian, Les anciennes croyances arméniennes (d'après le folk-lore arménien) (Genève, 1913), 12. See note 42 below on the epic David of Sasun. A summary of pagan survivals in the Christian culture of Armenia is given in E. Bauer, Arménie son histoire et son présent (Bibliothèque des Arts: Lausanne-Paris, 1977), 78-79.

⁹It appears from §735 that this is the same place where the column of light is revealed.

¹⁰The Armenian text does not explicitly mention Vaṭaršapat but the context makes it clear that the words "in the middle of the city" refer to Vaṭaršapat. (Vg) reads "in the most central place of the city Artašat," which does not seem original. On the other hand, (Vg) may be right in stating that the column of light and the other columns had "a royal foundation" (§77: krēpida basilikēn, §78: treis krēpidas basileōn). The word krēpis is often used of altar-foundations (see H. G. Liddell and R. Scott: A Greek-English Lexicon (ed. H. S. Jones; Oxford, 1940), 994), and perhaps the royal cult-places in Vaṭaršapat are hinted at: cf. the pagan remnants below the church of St. Hripsimē (see further note 56). The Armenian text (Aa) speaks about "a circular base" which is "near the royal palace" (§736). (Vg) translates the Armenian xarix "base" with basis.

¹¹The Armenian Bible uses the terms siwn ampoy and siwn hroy, and the words describing God's guidance during the night run as follows: lusatu linel noc'a i gnaln.

¹²It must, however, be noted that with regard to the wording Agat'angelos shows no direct dependence on the Armenian Bible. According to Ezek 1:26-27, the prophet sees something which resembles a throne (nmanut'iwn at'oroy) and above it the likeness of a human figure (nmanut'iwn kerparanac' mardoy) whose appearance is a radiant fire (ztesil hroy i nerk'oy). This is the kābōd of God which surrounds itself with light (ew loysn or šurj znowaw bak uner). In 10:4, the movement of the kābōd is described: the cloud filled the sanctuary and the courtyard was filled with the light of the glory of the Lord (ew srahn li ewew lusov p'arac'n teaṭn). The arrival of the kābōd in the new temple seen by Ezekiel makes the earth shine like luminaries around the "glory" (ew erkirn lusaworec'aw i nmanut'iwn lusa-worac' i p'aṭac'n šurjanaki). Daniel 7:9 mentions the throne of God which

was like flames of fire (at'oř nora ibrew zboc' hroy). The passage under discussion in Agat'angelos §738 runs: tesanēi at'oř zarmanali astuacakert sk'anč'eli hreřen ew zxač'n tērunakan i veray nora zorov p'areal xač'in ew maceal i noyn miacaw.

¹³Strabo in his Geography (11.14:16) states this influence with the following wording: "All sacred things (hapanta hiera) of the Persians, are also held in honour by both Medes and Armenians."

¹⁴Oratio 36:40.

¹⁵Dēnkart 7.2:56-58.

¹⁶The Pahlavi text runs: mart i rāyōmand.

¹⁷Selections of Zātspram 8:8-9. The most important words are: pat ātaxš aivēnak hač hān i asar rōšnēh frōt āmat.

¹⁸In Pahlavi: brāh ut payrōk dur giyāk payrokēnihist.

¹⁹See for this question A. Hultgard, "Das Judentum in der hellenistisch-römischen Zeit und die iranische Religion, ein religionsgeschichtliches Problem," Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt 2.19:1, 517-518, with reference to the works of G. Widengren and M. Molé.

²⁰Justinianus 38.2:1-3.

²¹The tradition concerning the Magi and their cult is first utilized by the author of the Gospel of Matthew in the infancy narrative 2:1-12. Using new legendary material, partly of Iranian origin, the theme is further elaborated in the Protoevangelium of James which, however, splits the unity of the primitive narrative into two distinct parts. First, the birth of Christ in the cave (19:2), which is filled with an intense light and when that light withdraws the child appears. Only later (21:1-2) the Magi arrive guided by the great Star from which, in the original Iranian tradition, the light filling the cave emanated. Drawing on the Gospel of Matthew and the Protoevangelium of James, the adoration of the Magi becomes a popular motif in Christian literature and art.

²²This has been pointed out by U. Monneret de Villard, Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici (Città del Vaticano, 1952), 48-50 and in particular by G. Widengren, Les religions de l'Iran (Paris: Payot, 1968), 238-243.

²³This is an anonymous commentary on the Gospel of Matthew probably redacted around the year 400. When commenting on Matt 2:1-12, the author asks, Qui sunt magi? Then he presents the information which was available to him about the Persian priests. The text with introduction and notes is found in J. Bidez and F. Cumont, Les mages hellénisés (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1938), 2.118-120.

²⁴This chronicle published under the title Incerti auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum, by I.-B. Chabot, (CSCO, Script. Syri. 43; Paris, 1927), is found in a ninth century manuscript of the Vatican library. The final redaction of the Chronicle took place around the year 775, but it incorporates much older materials. At some passages, the Chronicle gives rather long excerpts from other writings. On pages 41-45 we find a passage from the History of Alexander introduced with the words: mn tš'yt' d'1 'lksndrws. Similarly, when arriving at the birth of Christ, the Chronicle gives a long extract from an earlier source, prefaced with the following headline: "On the revelation of the magi and on their arrival in Jerusalem and on the offerings which they brought to the Christ" ('1 glyn' dmgwš' w'1 mtythwn dl'wršlm w'1 qwrbn' d'ytyw lmšyh'). The Opus imperfectum appears to draw on the same source as the Chronicle. The source is probably an early Jewish-Christian composition with gnostic tendencies which has incorporated authentic Iranian traditions in the description of the Magi and their cult.

²⁵Chronicle of Zuqnin (ed. Chabot), 66.

²⁶Ibid., 67.

²⁷Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae (CIMRM; ed. M. J. Vermaseren; Haag (M. Nijhoff, 1956), nos. 256, 353, 390, 428, and 860.

²⁸CIMRM, no. 42.4 (Fig. 18).

²⁹See M. J. Vermaseren, Mithras, Geschichte eines Kultus (Urban-bücher 83; Stuttgart, 1965), 51.

³⁰Plutarchus, Alexander 30:4. Darius raises a question to his eunuch which begins: eipe moi sebomenos Mithrou te phōs mega kai dexian basileion.

³¹Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Kallisthenes 1.36 (Historia Alexandri Magni; ed. W. Kroll; Berlin, 1926). The passage quoted belongs to one of the older sources of the Romance, see R. Merkelbach, Die Quellen des

griechischen Alexander-romans (München, 1954), 1-5, 39, and 195-219.

³²Porphyry, De antro nympharum, 5.

³³As far as I have been able to ascertain, Agat'angelos is the first to make use of the originally Iranian image of divine light or fire descending from heaven to earth in the form of a "column" or "stele" (cf. the phloginēn stēlēn of (Vg) §82). Gregory the Thaumaturge writes (around 270) concerning the Adoration of the Magi that "a star with its torch guided them" (Second Homily on the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary). Here a comet is meant, conceived as the star with its "torch" depicted on a coin of Augustus showing the caesaris astrum (H. Mattingly, Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum (London, 1923), (Plate VI, 6). In the Christian traditions of the Magi and the Star, the column of light appears in later compositions like the Syriac and the Armenian infancy gospels; see P. Peeters, Evangelies Apocryphes (Paris, 1914), 25 (the Syriac version) and 125 (the Armenian version).

³⁴Agat'angelos §736: xarix oski mecut'eamb ibrew zmec'mi blur.

³⁵Movsēs Xorenac'i, Patmut'iwn Hayoc' 1.31.

³⁶In this connection mention must also be made of the Gospel of Ējmiacin, showing the Adoration of the Magi who present crowns as gifts to the child, a feature which points to Iran. See G. Widengren, Iranische-semitische Kulturbegegnung in partischer Zeit (Köln-Opladen, 1960), 111.

³⁷Cf. G. Widengren, Les Religions de l'Iran, 252-53, with references to earlier literature. This temple is mentioned in Agat'angelos §790.

³⁸For this sanctuary, see the recent article by A. Sahinian: L'antico Tempio della fortezza di Garni (Actes du premier congrès international sur l'art arménien; Venice, 1979), 601-604.

³⁹See, for this, the discussion in A. Meillet, "Sur les termes religieux iraniens en arménien," REArm 1 (1920-21), 233-34; G. Widengren, Les Religions de l'Iran, 214; and I. Gershevitch, "Die Sonne das Beste," Mithraic Studies (ed. J. Hinnells; Manchester, 1975), 87.

⁴⁰Cf. also R. Frye, "Mithra in Iranian History," Mithraic Studies 1.66.

⁴¹A. Meillet, "Termes religieux iraniens," 234.

⁴²Dio Cassius, 63.5.

⁴³Pseudo-Plutarch, De Fluviis 26 §4.

⁴⁴The relevant parts have been translated into English by J. A. Boyle, "Mher in the Carved Rock," Mithraic Studies 1 (1976), 107-118. This translation is based upon the recension of D. Tchitouny, Sassounacan, épopée populaire arménienne (Paris, 1942), 1083-1097. For the connections of these popular traditions with western Mithraism, see I. Gershevitch, "Die sonne das beste," 81-89, and with the eschatological role of Mithra, see G. Widengren, Les Religions de l'Iran, 238.

⁴⁵Tchitouny, Sassounacan §887 line 3.

⁴⁶On the Mithridates and their royal ideology, see the summary in A. Hultgård, L'Eschatologie des Testaments des Douze Patriarches (Uppsala, 1977), 339-341.

⁴⁷For the royal monuments and inscriptions of the dynasty of Commagene, see K. Humann and O. Puchstein, Reisen in Kleinasien und Nordsyrien: Textband und Atlas (Berlin, 1890); K. Dörner and Th. Goell, Arsameia am Nymphaios (Berlin, 1963), and H. Waldmann, Die kommagenischen Kultreformen unter König Mithradates I: Kallininkos und seinem Sohne Antiochus I (Leiden, 1973).

⁴⁸CIMRM 19: Sagarios Mag[aphel]rnou strategos Ariaramneias emageuse Mithrē.

⁴⁹CIMRM 18, a dedication theō dikaiōi Mithrai. CIMRM 23 is dedicated to Mithra, God of the sun (from Phrygia first century A. D.), CIMRM 17 from Caesarea in Cappadocia: Soli invicto Mythrae. CIMRM 22 records the celebration of Mithrakana in Phrygia.

⁵⁰There is in Agat'angelos another passage which also seems to reflect the Iranian complex of light and fire symbolism. When the king and the people go down to baptism in the river Euphrates, a marvelous sign is revealed by God: an intense light (loys sastik) appears in the form of a shining column and above it is the likeness of the Lord's cross (§833).

⁵¹See A. Khatchatrian, L'architecture arménienne du IVe au VIe siècle (Paris, 1971), 77.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 75 suggests deities like Jupiter or Vulcanus.

⁵³Agat'angelos §809.

⁵⁴Cf. B. Piotrovsky: The ancient civilization of Urartu (Geneva, 1969), 153, 174.

⁵⁵Agat'angelos §812. P'awstos Buzand 30.3 states that this was the first church, mother of all other Armenian churches.

⁵⁶See A. Sahinian, Recherches scientifiques sous les voûtes de la cathédrale d'Etchmiadzine, REArm 3 (1966), 69, 50.

⁵⁷For the results of the excavations I rely on A. Sahinian, Recherches scientifiques, and his report, "Novye Dannye ob Arxitekturnom Oblike Ėmciacinskogo Sobora," (Orientalist Congress in Moscow, 1960), 575-578, and on Khatchatrian, L'architecture arménienne, 67-73.

⁵⁸Sahinian, Recherches scientifiques, 41-42 and A. Khatchatrian, L'architecture arménienne, 73, 84.

⁵⁹Sahinian, Recherches scientifiques, 42-43, 68.

⁶⁰Ibid., 70.

⁶¹The completion of this command is related in Agat'angelos §770, cf. §841.

⁶²Lazar P'arpec'i 8 in the description of Vaṭaršapat: Zhreštakac'oyc himnarkut'iwnn srboy tann astucoy.

⁶³Lazar P'arpec'i 16-17. The opening of the heavens may be a traditional image, but the intense light which illuminates the earth and the appearance of a man resplendant of light is taken from Agat'angelos. The text states explicitly that the vision of Sahak is similar to the one Gregory had.

⁶⁴So for instance J. Strzygowski, Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa (Wien, 1918) I.334, and A. Sahinian, Recherches scientifiques, 42-43.

⁶⁵P'awstos Buzand 4.55, 58.

⁶⁶P'awstos 4.58 records only that Vahan and Meružan ordered fire-temples to be built on several localities as on their own domains.

⁶⁷The reason for not building a church on this spot is not given. In §782 within the framework of a general description of Gregory's work, it is said that he did not build an altar anywhere because he was not a priest. This seems, however, an artificial explanation in view of the fact that there

were bishops and priests in Armenia before and during the period of Gregory.

⁶⁸See Khatchatrian, L'architecture arménienne, 71.

⁶⁹Cf. E. Herzfeld, Archaeological History of Iran (London, 1935), 66-67, 88-93.

⁷⁰Cf. Widengren, Les Religions de l'Iran, 304.

⁷¹In Uruk-Warka there has been found a construction with an apse, in all probability a Mithra-sanctuary; cf. *Ibid.*, 259 and Fig. C.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 73-86.

⁷³The redaction of the authoritative Armenian text. See for this R. W. Thomson, Agathangelos, xxv.

⁷⁴Agat'angelos §§768-770, 782, 784, 785.